

# Four Quarters



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## Marginalia . . .

"Four Quarters looks different," says Constant Reader. "Of course," we say. "With the help of our friendly printers at Star Publishing, we've changed to a new type face—two new faces, as a matter of fact." By this time, Constant Reader, bored with typographical talk, is already well into M.M. Liberman's splendid story, "O'Malley," thereby proving that the new type is more attractive and legible than the old. That, after all, was the general idea in making the change. We've reached the age where readability is a matter of concern, and the new type may stave off bifocals another year.

\* \* \*

As long as we're calling attention to changes, we might as well note with some reluctance our slight increase in price—the first, believe it or not, in the magazine's 21-year history. The increase won't wipe out our annual deficit, but it should help a bit with the postage bill. We'd like to believe that any increase is infinitesimal in comparison to the ever-increasing quality of the magazine, not to mention the greater number of pages than usual we're featuring this time.

\* \* \*

Speaking of size, our special Robert Penn Warren issue of last May, the largest we've ever published, met with a fine response. We did print extra copies, however, and some back numbers of this issue are still available.

\* \* \*

The Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines cheered our summer months with news of a modest grant to support our continuing publication. We thank the Council for their recognition; we'll use the funds to offer more space to talented contributors.

\* \* \*

Talent certainly abounds in this issue. We're especially pleased by the variety and originality of the fiction: each of the four stories seems to us to have striking touches that we think will impress you as much as they did us.

J. J. K.



# O'Malley

M. M. LIBERMAN

THROUGH the nearly opaque window of Cadoon's, drinking bitter tea and eating burnt toast for the sake of my stomach, I would search the morning street for Terrance O'Malley, who I knew would be along soon for his own breakfast, nursing a terrible head. It would be only a quarter to nine but already I would be soaked in Cambridge heat, fret and self-doubt. I cared what O'Malley thought of me. He was, for two weeks in July, and three in August, my teacher in the art of fiction, and a renowned author. Yeats once said of him that what Chekhov had done for the Russian short story, he had done for the Irish. I was coming to resent him for his meanness and the way he permitted the others to play up to him, but most of all because he took no pains to disguise the way he found me tiresome, what with my intensity about writing and my damp-palmed youthful yearnings for nearly everything. Seeing me at this very table, he would sometimes pretend not to, and walk by. In class he faulted everything I wrote. He said nice things behind my back.

Desperate as I was to have lively conversations with him, of a variety I could some day report, nearly verbatim, in my autobiography, I could think of nothing to say that would interest O'Malley and there were long wounding silences on those mornings he couldn't escape me, while he dripped egg into his mustache and ran one hand through his Poseidon's grizzled head of hair and glared up and down and around as if in imitation of a wild singer from Cork. I didn't know what to say to a man who tells me that he has a hangover "to make poteen look like ice-water." I cared only for the language of hopes and fears. Talker though he was his only true topic was himself, and since mine was *me* it was a Mexican standoff.

His obsessions were very young women, wealth, a hearing problem (he had taken the Harvard job that summer so he could avail himself of the local medical specialties), Americans, the

Jews of France, an original theory of dreams (with which he regaled the very young women), England's incipient famine, his own literary reputation, Freud as a figure of fun, the impossibility of an Irishman's writing a novel today, Catholicism, and, of course, James Joyce, of whom he spoke with compulsive bitterness, as a man pokes deep with whatever is handy into a chronically itching ear: the arrogant looney Joyce had ruined everything with his fat, dirty book which was no novel at all, but an encyclopedia disguised as a guide of Dublin stews for pee aiatch dee critics who were the only ones who were depraved enough to make out they could read the monster, conceived by the most clever rhetorician and hoaxer of all times.

Born John Mulligan, O'Malley's nom de plume, like most of his life, was an original. He was altogether self-made, having been orphaned young. He had had no advantages. He educated himself in the public library and learned to write by reading everything. I'm told that when he died a few years ago in his early sixties he had drunk himself out of his liver in California where he had gone with his new young wife to taper off, which is to say that he went as he came, a victim of a malnourished peasant birth, an old man forever a poor Irish kid, hating right and left, never forgetting that his coughing mother could not afford a doctor, blaming his errant father, the Jesuits and the rich, and, for all I know, himself. Still and all he had been Terrance O'Malley because he had said so; had been befriended in the Abbey days and had had his shyness eased by Yeats's George. Later there were wives and mistresses. He published a novel he wanted to forget and a book of poems, and one glittering wrought tale after another of Irish life into which he hammered a universe of dry, blessed affection for his people and the strange particularities of their woeful lives. He was tall, spare, stooped, horsefaced and furious. I was to learn that women found him appealing.

We listened, Gombrowicz, later to become a successful playwright, his friend, a Smith girl called Prudence Appleton, on a three weeks' vacation from her job on LIFE, and I, as O'Malley, wolfing down a plate of bacon, raved about his ill-treatment at the hands of some bitch of a girl in one of the university business offices when he went there to see why he hadn't been paid. It seemed his name had failed to turn up on the payroll at all. An oversight. Not unprecedented. Correctable, but not immediately. Meanwhile, as O'Malley saw it, for all Harvard Summer School cared, O'Malley could starve. In my own ingenuous way I offered him the loan of a few dollars I couldn't afford and lost

another five points with everyone for fatuousness. "Ah, Christ, I have plenty of money. It's not that," said O'Malley. Gombrowicz fell in with a girlish giggle, and Prudence looked her most catatonic, Connecticut, superior, and oddly boyish behind her perfect skin and breasts which only hinted at their existence. My groin had cramped at the first whiff of her baby talcum smell, even as I took her for a ninny, and I was relieved when O'Malley let me out of the bad impression I was making by paying me no more attention and by ranting on about bureaucracies of the peculiar American variety. It followed that between Eisenhower and Stevenson there would be absolutely no choice for anyone with so much as a biscuit for a brain. At last he wanted to know if we didn't feel sometimes as if we hated everyone in the world. Gom and Pru had the sense to appear to be pondering the question. I blurted out my sincerest "No." From there on it was all down hill, including especially the trip later to New York.

Once Gom asked O'Malley to explain a remark about *Dubliners* he had tossed off in class the day before. "Of course, I hate to ask you to chew your cabbage twice, but it sounded so damned interesting and, well, I just didn't get it. I thought about it all last night." By an instinctive movement of my hand to my eyes, I spilled my coffee and most of it went on O'Malley's lap. I grieved that he couldn't see Gom for a lying suck. "Dammit, Larry, wake up to other people, can't you?" O'Malley snarled, blotting his trousers with a paper napkin. Gom ran around the table like a cocker spaniel looking for a doctor. My humiliation was fierce. O'Malley now grandly pretended it hadn't happened, making me feel all the worse. Pru played with the brown fuzz on her arm. O'Malley now spoke to Gom alone: "What we care about in "The Sisters" is the style, and you don't realize that the style started with Walter Pater and Flaubert and the reader is out of it. There is no place for his compassion or his understanding for that matter. What's the point of the priest's nervous breakdown, or whatever it was? Does anyone know?"

"Hmm, yes, of course," said Gom. "I know what you mean. I hadn't thought of that."

"I see what you mean, too," I said, "and I *have* thought of that, and I don't see that it matters. We don't know the priest's story exactly, but we know so many other things—oh the things we know—things that touch on it in some strange way so that the whole mystery is wonderful, like, uh, like a glow in the dark."

Gom waited for his cue and when O'Malley guffawed, Gom guffawed, and when O'Malley said, "Oh my God," Gom muttered something like "Come off it, . . . say that about anything,"

and looked at O'Malley for his score. Pru stopped listening. Eyeing her throughout, I couldn't stop talking, even as I described, unwittingly, the paltry universe of my concern, and heard it all bubbling out of me: "... for example, in that manuscript of mine I turned in the other day . . ." "Never mind that now Larry," said O'Malley sternly, "Let's save great literature for last."

## II

THE very fact of their being Harvard students has always conferred upon Harvard students the right, granted to no one else, to see Harvard as vastly overrated. Only Harvard students, thanks to their superiority as Harvard students, enjoy this perception. Pru thought Harvard students in general "light-footed," excepting Gom. Gom appeared to think of nothing but Pru's behind. I thought I had learned nothing at the little New Jersey school from which I had been graduated two years before, envied Gom his Harvard as well as his Pru, and hoped it was all a lie. Cambridge I had to admit, however, was a murderous bore, and since I couldn't spend all my time trying to write and taking cold showers, I tramped the town's narrow streets all hours of the night, and once when I met O'Malley in front of Casey's, he invited me in for a drink. We downed two or three, almost silent, smoked, sighed, and regarded students who filed in and out like Apaches. O'Malley used a holder to take the curse off tobacco. I had taken up the same practice because my mouth hurt. When O'Malley saw mine, he laughed straight in my face. I know he thought I was aping him. I could have told him that I admired his stories and envied his success, but that if I were going to set out to be anyone but myself it would be Joyce who said of himself with celestial arrogance and heartbreaking accuracy that there was nothing he couldn't do with words. In any case, right then, had I my choice of choices, I would have been that bubblehead, Gom, since he had Pru, and I couldn't look at a sack of onions without thinking of a naked woman. That O'Malley asked me to drink with him had astonished me, and I could only conclude that in his own crabbed way, he was lonely too. Tears gagging me, I confessed when he asked, "Ah, Larry, how goes it, anyway? Can you stand this filthy heat? It's making me half-sick." I told him of my affair with a married woman, the wife of a good friend who I had thus betrayed and had since left her; how I had arranged for her to abort a child she had said was surely mine; how I missed her but had no claim on her, since I would not marry her; how the whole business had made me



silly with self-loathing and a gripping premonition that my life would come to nothing or worse. Throughout, through moons of smoke, he examined me with the un-softened eyes of the fabulist who sees that very irony which makes no irony final.

I knew I should have kept my desperate mouth shut. For my hopes and fears he didn't give a damn. He only said, "I have a family too." He didn't add, although I saw it hanging in the air, "American boy, you're bloody messy."

I spent the next week in my rooms, babying my irritable bowel and working. I didn't attend any more of O'Malley's classes. When the session closed, I was going to leave Cambridge for good. I tried to forget about Gom and Pru and took up briefly with a school-teacher from Utah, but it was a drab business. I avoided Cadoon's by skipping breakfast altogether and putting my other meals together out of a German delicatessen. Now and then I would reflect on my having said that night to O'Malley, as we were leaving the bar, that Pru was, no brains aside, "a nice kid." And his reaction: Ah, Jesus, she's not nice at all. When I see my publisher in New York, she's meeting me there." It wasn't so much what O'Malley said that struck me; if Pru stayed with Gom, why not O'Malley? O'Malley was at least a man; whatever his conceits, he didn't look as if he spent his mornings making his carefully barbered hair look windblown and sailboaty. Rather, it was the expression the curve of his mouth gave his mocking face. This man we had asked to teach us to write, babes that we were, might have been no Irish Chekhov, but that New England farmer who waits behind his rocks until you have bought the farm next door and settled in, and then tells you why the former owner sold.

### III

I BUMPED into Gom at a movie and he said he would drive me to the station. I said I didn't want to bother him, but he said it was no bother and besides he would consider it a kind of favor because he wanted to talk to me. He seemed agitated and looked as if he had lost some baby fat. I asked where Pru was and he just waved his hand in some vague way. The next day I sat on my suitcase and waited for him in front of my place although he wasn't due for an hour. I wanted that badly to get out. Upstairs the phone rang and I finally dragged my sticky hulk up to answer it. It was Pru who wanted to talk to me. She said she would come right over and I told her that Gom was going to pick me up. She said it wouldn't take an hour. She

showed about forty minutes later looking fresh and stupid and altogether desirable in some kind of white pinafore with little dots on it and her hair done up in a pageboy.

"What do you people want of me?" I asked. "I've been here five weeks, lonely enough to die, and all I've gotten from any of you is the privilege of being the butt of your jokes while you've been sucking around O'Malley. You think your Ivy League asses weigh a ton. You know what I think? I think Gom is Lassie's brother and you're little Miss Marker. As for O'Malley, he couldn't carry Joyce's glove." I might have been out of my mind the way she looked at me and then she began to cry and I collapsed with her. "What are you crying for," I shouted. And then I whispered, "It's not you who's been mistreated."

"I'm pregnant," she said.

"Congratulations. But I can't think of a thing in the world that has less to do with me."

"You don't understand."

"What do you mean I don't understand? I understand pregnant. You're knocked up. You sleep with Gom and you're going to have a baby. So what? Tell Gom. Tell O'Malley. He'll tell you you're a slut. Don't for Christ sake tell Joyce. For him your story was over before you got into bed." I knew I was raving brutally but it was the first justice I had known since I could last remember.

"I want you to take me to New York and help me get an abortion."

"What in hell are you talking about? I don't even know you. You wouldn't give me the time of day. Gom's the father of your baby. He's got a car. What in hell are you talking about anyway?"

"You can use Gom's car. You can do it."

"Do what, you lousy little drip. DO WHAT?"

"Take me. Get me fixed. O'Malley says you can do it."

Now *she* was shouting. "O'Malley says you're the kind that can do it. You can at least do *that*. Your kind can do *that*."

#### IV

I TOOK Pru to New York. Then I brought her back to Cambridge. I was tired and decided to stay there. I never got a word from her. One day I met her with O'Malley and they pretended not to know me.

## DREAM SONGS Concluded

*for John Berryman, 1914-1972*

SISTER MAURA, S.S.N.D.

Henry was sick of winter, John dying of  
living. Together they walked across the bridge  
to the library. Following truth, no doubt,  
John said. Truth detoured,  
going home the short way—under water.  
John followed like a bulging sack.

Henry turned,  
fled back to the printed page.

Under black water truth cored the river.  
John sucked the dark totality into his lungs.

Truth absorbed the pull of tide, plunged  
into the root of water. John followed,  
gained momentum in desire, felt the coldness  
of the fire, brilliant burning of the root.

While sirens stopped to let the grappling  
nets into the river, someone gave the story  
to the press, the pictures to TV.  
"He chose the wrong way."

Not so John said not so. Mercy and truth  
are one in the root of the river.

At last I am free.  
I am free.

## The Earring Syndrome

CHARLES EDWARD EATON

The tall, handsome woman would hang lilacs  
From her ears like bizarre, lavish pendants  
If her mind could stand the opulent weight,  
An elephantiasis of amethyst,  
An extreme gesture that would not pull  
Her to the ground—absurdly felled by earrings.  
So it has been said, we walk by climbing.  
The woman has built herself from ground up,  
The brain could be the heaviest thing,  
A purple jewel hidden in the skull.  
Then why has springtime made her feel like tumbleweed,  
This particular spring, vicious and mad,  
When she looks the lady to everyone,  
A beautifully fluted, extended creature?  
So feverishly she longs for earrings,  
Ah, the lush drop from either side of mind,  
The exquisite, scented, natural heaviness!—  
One baldly takes the psychiatric stance:  
Life in our times is just not livable—  
A cherished woman wanting this much more,  
The incomparable bauble at the peak.  
Still she moves like the proud queen of our dreams—  
If we can, we see her through the mad scene,  
The frightful tearing of the purple dress  
As if she would pour her flesh upon the ground,  
The trampling of lilacs as though they were grapes—  
There was this sad, light, vacuous feeling,  
The top not being what it might have been.  
We give her all the earrings she desires  
As if their weight would keep her where she is.



# Naked Lady

CAROL ADORJAN

IT is morning. Monday. I am weeding the roses. They are more fragrant now than in the afternoon, or would be if they had bloomed as they should have done a week ago. The buds are large, ready to unfurl, but something—I do not know what—is wrong. I found a bud this morning, brown and rotted on the ground. Thrips, I think, though I have yet to see one. Pale yellow, the book says, or yellowish brown and small: one-sixteenth of an inch. All I know about these roses is in that book. The book tells me what to do and I do it. Still the roses fail to bloom. Perhaps it is the wet weather. Even today, though it is dry and hot, the odor of rain hangs in the air.

A bee buzzes at my ear, makes a circle around my head. Absently, I wave him away. But he persists and I know it is the hair spray and the yellow scarf that attract him. *I am not a flower*, I think. *Far from it*. In a little while he, too, will know that I am not and he will buzz off.

There are other sounds: the drone of power mowers feeding on the terraced lawns of Coventry Gardens; the squeak of a delivery truck; a caterpillar tractor (louder in my memory than in reality) chewing at some undeveloped soil; children's shouts reduced by distance to a whisper; and the gentle flapping of the lavender sheets on my neighbor Marion's line—the only clothesline, no doubt, in the whole of Coventry Gardens. Familiar Monday sounds. Persistent as the bee and as unimportant.

But there is another sound: a siren. I am remote from that, too, and like the bee it will fade away. But it grows loud—louder!—tearing at the silent sounds of Monday morning. And though it cannot affect me (Harold is safe at his metal desk behind the plexiglass partition in the long row of plexiglass partitions beside the windows, and I am here on my knees in the dirt), though we are safe, my heart races the yelping siren

and I sit back on my heels, listening and waiting. Under the siren, closer but not as loud, there is another sound: an indistinguishable murmur like something in a dream and I strain to hear. One last wail and the yelping dies, but the other sound—the murmur—builds to a crescendo of excited wordless voices and of running feet.

I push myself up from the dirt and I am dizzy from the sudden upward plunge. My scalp prickles and my blouse sticks to my back. Feeling the rough brick on my hand, against my shoulder, I move along the wall of our house to the driveway beside it.

A stream of people, their faces glazed with curiosity and excitement and fear, move down Bluebird Lane, some of them leaning back, reining in as their feet propel them to the bottom of the hill. And I wonder, *Where do they come from—all these running people?* I have been here in this house on this street for a year and a half and never before have I seen so many people. They remind me curiously of worms after a rain.

I rub my dry caked hands on the back of my slacks as I go down the drive and out into the street. Words wash over me: "Stark naked!" "Raving mad!" "Of all people!" But I am as uncomprehending as flotsam caught up in a tide.

At the end of the block where Bluebird Lane flows into Eden Place there is a chilling hush. And I see beyond the knots of people a blanketed figure folding itself into a blue and white squad car. It is Marion. I know that even before she turns her face, blurred and wraithlike in the motion of the car as it veers away from the curb. She seems to nod to me as though she were in her yard still, stretching and bending, hanging lavender sheets over the only clothesline in the whole of Coventry Gardens.

A policeman, arms outspread, sweeps toward the spectators. "All right. Break it up. All you people, go home. It's all over. The excitement's over for today."

The knots of people come undone, reposition and retie. The policeman hops into the second squad. In it, Marion's three children sit. Her youngest boy presses against the back window grinning. Another boy, eight maybe or nine, erupts into the streets chanting something I do not understand at first but recognize just the same. Marion's boy raises his thumb to his nose as the car lurches, its wheels spitting loose gravel and chunks of mud, and he drops from sight. The hush collapses in a scalding rush of words and nervous laughter. Other children take up the chant, breaking loose from small protective clusters,

scooping up the loose gravel and flinging it into the squad's dusty swirling wake.

A voice buzzes at my ear. "Wouldn't you know it'd be *her*."

I am absorbing the rhythm of the chant and I shake my head to wave this single voice away. But it persists.

"Didn't I tell you?"

*I see London.*

"They didn't belong here."

*I see France.*

"I could see that."

*Your mother's got no—*

Everything is motion, roiling, writhing motion, and I grab onto the voice beside me, trying to steady myself against it.

"From the very first day I could see they didn't belong."

Eve Larkin's pale mouth moves, talking to me, but her eyes look through me, beyond me, speaking to the crowds. And I cannot understand the words. She cradles a white poodle, Caesar, who has heart trouble and trembles when I look at him. "I called the police, you know. Looked out and there were those sheets on the line. Every Monday—those damned lavender sheets! I was about to draw the drapes when *she* came running across her front lawn naked as the day she was born." She laughs. "You wouldn't believe the conversation. What do you say? 'There's a naked lady on Bluebird Lane'? It's absurd! I was afraid they'd come after *me*." Caesar yips and burrows into her arms, the hair on top of his head standing out like a crest of feathers. "Lucky thing we never got mixed up with her if you ask me." She says, "See you this afternoon," and drifts off, following her eyes to a group bunched at the curb.

I push up Bluebird Lane through the veil of heat that rises from the steaming pavement. Overhead, a few nondescript clouds nuzzle at the sun, and in the safety of our drive, mirage puddles lie on the rippled blacktop. A sudden breath of hot wind catches Marion's sheets, and I wonder who will be there to take them in.

I go through the back door into the house—my house—where we have lived, Harold and I, for a year and a half as long as we have lived anywhere. It is a nice house. Clean. I clean it myself as though I were being paid to clean it, as though at the end of each day someone will knock on the heavy oak door: "I have come for inspection." And I am satisfied that it is cleaner now than on the day we trudged in leaving shifting footprints in the white plaster dust and the fine black grit that had been displaced by the digging and the building

and had come to rest on the hardwood floors and the window sills and the closet shelves.

The kitchen is large and sunny and modern and efficient, every need anticipated in blueprint so that even the toaster disappears into the wall when not in use, and the silent cordless clock above the stainless steel sink was there to begin with, as old as the house and not one minute older. And it is odorless. The ripe fruit in the black bowl on the formica snack bar is wax and nothing bakes in the self-cleaning oven.

I pass through louvered doors into the dining room, the living room, white wall blending with white wall, broken only by three hollow beams spanning the high living room ceiling. I walk cautiously, not wishing to disturb the graceful symmetry of this room, past the green velvet sofa I never sit in because I am afraid to disarrange the delicate shading and because of the burnished silver lamps that flank it like sentinels. And I realize that nothing here—not even the map above the sofa, a reproduction of the world before it grew so small—is as old as I.

*A new life, Harold says inside where my mind stores yesterday. No more cramped apartments. That's been the problem. Space. A person needs space to put down roots, have a family. And no more scratched hand-down tables. We'll buy new ones and make our own scratches.*

So we leave the apartment—the fourth we have lived in during the six years of our marriage. We close the door on the scratched tables and the secondhand love seat and the brick and plywood book shelves, and we come here where new houses are built to look old, copies of other periods with mansard roofs and atriums and square pillars, set this way and that at odd angles to one another, meticulously planned to look unplanned. *No two alike, says the builder. At least not on the same square block.* But the blocks are not square; they are circles and wedges and cogs defined by circular drives and gently winding roads, some of them as yet unpaved.

We come here where there is space—or the illusion of it—and an artificial lake gouged out of the center of the development at the foot of Eden Place. I can see that lake, a gleaming, pie-shaped wedge of it, from where I stand looking east out my leaded and casemented living room windows.

We come here where the trees have been left to grow, their roots intertwining with a network of electrical lines and telephone lines and gas pipes and sewer pipes, running beneath the surface of the ground like veins.

We come here where I look at decorating books with pictures



of perfect rooms and I feel swatches of material not knowing what I am to see or to feel. And in the end I give it up and buy everything from one store because they have a very good woman, I am told, who will do the entire house at no extra charge. She does it, smiling smugly at the results for which Harold pays slowly doing other people's taxes at night when it is the season and working long hours in his plexiglass cubicle when it is not.

And it is a perfect picture, sterile as newsprint, where the one thing out of place is me. Only the trees know I do not fit. They lean together at night in dark conspiracy, peering in windows, searching for signs of weakness and stress, waiting patiently to reclaim the land. Only the trees . . . and Marion.

I close the heavy green draperies and I stand in the middle of the room looking for some niche in the wall where I can disappear when I am not in use.

But I am confused. It is Marion who does not fit. Not I. Hasn't everyone known that? *From the very first day*, Eve Larkin says.

Their very first day—Marion's and Tony's—I remember, is a billboard-bright October day. As they pull up, all their belongings in a rented trailer, I notice that the trees have exploded (overnight it seems) in fiery bursts of color. A glorious welcome. Impulsively I pull on a sweater and cross to their drive.

Marion is thin and frail in ill-fitting black slacks and sweater, her shoulder length hair, an indefinite brown, falling in strips about her narrow face, and when she smiles I see that her bottom teeth are stained and crooked.

They bought the house cheap she tells me proudly. The Dennisons, who sold it to them, are in the process of a divorce and were anxious to unload it. *Tony knows a deal when he sees one*, Marion says. She looks down the drive to the trailer where Tony hoists a faded rose matelasse chair to his back, his muscles rippling beneath his rolled shirt sleeves. *He likes the sound of it: Coventry Gardens. Posh. I looked it up. You know what it said? 'To send to Coventry'—it's an expression. It means—I remember exactly—'To refuse to associate with.' I guess you can't get more exclusive than that!*

I shift uneasily from one foot to another as she continues, *I didn't want to move. We had a nice place. Old, maybe, and so close to next door we could open our windows and join them for dinner, but—. Well, like Tony says, this'll be good for the kids. Space. Air. Nice friends.*

I edge away. *There's something in the oven*, I explain,

though there is not, and, wondering if anyone has seen me, I turn my back without mentioning the coffee I had come to offer.

I step over leaves that have already fallen, exhausted by their red and golden rage, and I go into my house, where I wait for the others to ring Marion's bell bringing the yellow chart that lists all the people in all the houses on Bluebird Lane. But no one comes and Marion sees my own diagram one day on the bulletin board beside the phone.

*Say, that's a good idea.*

*Isn't it? Eve gives one to everybody when they move in.* Red-hot bursts explode on my cheeks when I realize what I have said. Marion seems not to notice.

*How long did it take before all these names had faces?* she asks, and I remember the coffees and the barbecues those first few months, but I say nothing. *I don't mind for myself,* she adds, *but the kids. And Tony—he likes to be part of things.* She looks up suddenly, challenging me with her eyes. *You should change this. It still says Dennison.*

I hurry into the kitchen. "Wait, Marion. Don't go. I'll change it now. You'll see." But it is too late. Marion is gone, whisked off in a squad car, and the telephone is ringing—a life-line reeling me back to the present.

It is Harold. "In the top left-hand drawer of the desk," he says. "An envelope marked *Larkin*. It's for John. Take it to Eve when you go this afternoon.

I am puzzled. "This afternoon?"

"It's Monday, isn't it?"

Yes. It is Monday. I play bridge on Monday afternoons. Badly. Marion irons. *Tony's got this thing about sheets, she tells me. Raquel Welch or somebody could be in the bed and if the sheets weren't ironed he wouldn't set foot in it. He says I should send them to the laundry; we can afford it. But—I don't know—it seems sinful somehow, and they don't smell the same. Funny thing: when Tony was a kid he was lucky if he had a sheet and now—!*

I shrink from the confidence, the intimacy of which she does not seem to recognize, and I say to Harold: "I want to move."

Into the ringing silence, Harold fits a hollow ironic laugh. "You'd think we were playing Monopoly the way you want to move around."

*Monopoly*, I think, *yes*. I'll give you Park Place for Baltic and—wait! I'll throw in the house. But it doesn't work. Who-

ever heard of trading down? And there are no trees. And the blocks are square.

"How can we move? The furniture's not even paid for?"

Will that make a difference? A piece of paper: *Paid in Full*. Will I be able, then, to sit in the green velvet sofa?

"What happened anyway? What happened this time?"

He pauses, awaiting an answer, and I wait too, knowing there must be one somewhere under the surface if I can only remember where it went down. "The roses are dying."

"We'll get new roses for Chrisake. Look, I can't talk. Remember the envelope for John, will you? I'm on my lunch hour."

Click. We are disconnected.

Click. Marion is just inside the back door holding African violets in red clay pots. She sets them down and black dirt pellets bounce onto the white counter. *I thought maybe you'd like these. The others I can plant outside maybe, but not the violets. And I can't just throw them out. How could I do that? He never said before he didn't like the plants. At home—I mean in our other place, where we were before—he never said. She starts out. Hope you don't mind—about the door. It was open and, well—I like to think we're . . . friends?*

I go to the door and turn the lock. Click.

**M**Y trick," Eve declares, her gold bracelets clicking against the card table.

Sitting quietly across from her, a hand exposed before me, I have a strong impression of motion as though we were adrift in her vast blue living room. Suits merge, numbers blur, awash in rainbow-edged puddles of sunlight, and I cannot remember why I have come.

Except for Eve, whose face is set with concentration, the others seem to have forgotten, too. Louise glances disinterestedly from the board to her hand, doubling her chin as she lowers her eyes. "Whose queen?" she asks pretending that it matters. Charlotte sighs and snaps her cards into fresh alignment after every play. At the other table, backs of heads and parts of faces bob over the cards as they do every Monday. But something has changed. Strange, opposing currents course under the surface ritual of the game, and, though no one has spoken her name, Marion is here in this room.

*I don't have to iron on Monday, she says. It's not going to get up and walk away—is it?—if I played cards or something*

one Monday. *I've never played bridge, but I could learn. I'm very good at cards.*

A wave of laughter rises up from the other table. Across the room, Caesar trembles and draws himself into a tight white ball in the center of a French Provincial chair.

*I can't invite you, Marion. It's not my house. And I'm new to the group myself, I say so that only Marion hears. You understand.*

*Is it me?* Marion persists. *Tony—he thinks it's my fault.*

"It's your fault we're in this predicament," Eve says, scowling at my exposed hand. She makes her play, a one-eyed jack, and I wonder what is on the other side of his perfect profile.

Shrugging, Louise drops a card.

Eve sweeps up another trick and with it, it seems, the splotches of sunlight.

Charlotte sighs, "Rain. Wouldn't you know?"

*Rain.* Inexplicably, I am panicked by the thought. My breath shudders through me, and I feel as though I am not here in this vast open room, but somewhere else, closed in, looking out, alone and shivering. And there is something—I cannot think what—that I have left undone. "Rain? Is it raining?"

"It will be soon."

"It can't," I say. "Not yet." I look from one to another but their faces are empty of the urgency I feel. "Marion's—" Before I realize I have spoken her name, the uneasy reserve in the room crumbles. Words rush through. I am frantic to follow the conversation, but each thought I reach out for breaks like a twig.

"That husband of hers!"

"Such an odd look—all those muscles!"

"... a pervert or something."

"... never trusted ..."

"... my Jamie, 'I don't want you playing with ...'"

"The oldest one ..."

"... drove her to it."

"Lucky for us ..."

"She always looked so ..."

"Haphazard. All those plants!"

"A jungle!"

One comment breaks through solid and intact: "I for one will never be able to look her in the eye again!"

I hear Marion respond: *It's the first thing I notice about people: their eyes. Take yours. That very first day I noticed the brown fleck in the left one. And the right—it's a darker green.*

"What color are they?" No one hears the strange and distant



voice I recognize with a rush of shock as my own. "What color are Marion's eyes?" Expressions freeze, words break off, stares burn into me like icicles. *Go ahead, look at me, I think. Look at someone before it's too late.* I stand and the cards bounce on the table.

Eve's face is the first to close up. She laughs. "You're not leaving now! We're still vulnerable."

I say, "I hope so," and I go outside where the sun burns a ragged hole through the graying clouds. Across Bluebird Lane, I examine my roses carefully, looking for the trouble. I see a tiny yellow insect boring into a bud. A thrip. I get the rose duster from the garage and spray the roses and the leaves with bursts of powder like smoke signals. When I have finished, I cross to Marion's yard, and, wrapped in the fragrance of the sun, I take down her lavender sheets.

## She Is A Straight Tree

WILLIAM VIRGIL DAVIS

She is a straight tree in a storm.  
When she speaks, her words  
Drain into me like rain and seep  
Down into the dry roots of my being.  
Her arms encircle me in sleep  
Like branches and I rest easy within them  
Even through long nights  
Of wind and rain. For years now  
I have rested in her and risen up  
In the morning like a bird breaking cover.

## My Father's Eyes

W. S. DOXEY

My son is not like me.  
My daughter is.  
She calls, I hear.  
My son's voice somehow misses.

At times I sense in him  
The other men my wife  
Might have known, had she  
Not shared with me her life.

And then all seems very clear—  
He is her revenge.  
I could not give her money,  
Jewels, furs, anything,

So she gave me him—  
Tall, blond, lean—  
Who's not like me.  
His eyes are blue, not green.

Mine are very green indeed.  
Green too is my heart.  
But no matter what I feel,  
I cannot take his part.

But, then, neither could  
My father take mine.  
His eyes were very blue;  
They watched me all the time.

# Imagery in Charles Williams' "Many Dimensions"

DOUGLASS BOLLING

CHARLES WILLIAMS' seven prose fictions stand as perhaps his most significant achievement. And this despite the writer's impressive work in theological studies, in literary criticism, verse drama and poetry. Williams' interests and competence ranged widely; his books, essays, and reviews suggest a person of considerable energy who accomplished enough for two or three careers in one life-time. In the seven novels—more accurately described as prose romances—Williams won through to a sometimes brilliant fusion of religious and doctrinal commitment on the one hand and literary craftsmanship on the other. The novels have strong agreements with the fictions of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien and indeed rival in quality the works of the two. As did his fellow Anglo-Catholic T. S. Eliot, Williams sought in each of his literary works to explore the possibilities of a Christian aesthetic in the face of a world pervaded by secularism and a largely naturalistic view of reality. Williams' choice of the high mimetic of romance for his prose fictions reflects his belief in a sacramental universe.<sup>1</sup> Critical studies of the novels and other writings continue to appear; but much work remains to be done if the richness and artistry achieved by this writer are to be perceived.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, the controlling principle of the fictions—the author's notion of Christian

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1 For an informed and sensitive discussion of the sacramental aesthetic see: William V. Spanos, *The Christian Tradition in Modern British Verse Drama: The Poetics of Sacramental Time* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1967).

2 See for example: Gunnar Urang, *Shadows of Heaven: Religion and Fantasy in the Writing of C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and J. R. R. Tolkien* (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1971); and Clinton W. Trowbridge, "The Beatricean Character in the Novels of Charles Williams," *Sewanee Review* (Summer 1971), 335-343.

decorum—needs to be examined in the light of the imagistic and symbolic strategies by which it is made concrete and vital for the reader. In the following pages I shall discuss two major image patterns in Williams' third novel, *Many Dimensions* (1931): the patterns of hand imagery and mouth/speech/breath imagery. Williams' approach to fiction was a subtle and informed one; all seven novels reveal a structural and textural richness which repays the second and third reading—something which cannot be said for a good deal of present-day fiction. Image patterns best evince this richness. But first some background.

In *Many Dimensions* Williams explores the place of justice, humility, and self-sacrifice in the normative Christian vision and pits them against pride, ruthlessness, and an amoral scientism. Characteristically the moral drama is heightened and energized through use of a "supernatural" apparatus, in this instance the mysterious stone taken from the crown of Solomon. Among other symbolic potencies the stone is to be seen as "first matter" and thus has immense importance. The representatives of goodness—principally the Chief Justice Lord Arglay and the heroine Chloe Burnett—contend against the forces of evil—chiefly Sir Giles Tumulty and followers—for possession of the stone and its "types." The stakes are enormous: for everything that has "followed" from first matter—the very creation itself—is put in doubt. Sir Giles wishes to exploit the stone for his own ends of profit and power; he has only contempt for its alleged sacramental or religious implications; Chloe wishes only to return the stone to its place in the divine plan, to the mysteries which transcend human logic. The reader familiar with Williams' other fictions will be reminded of a similar introduction of the supernatural vehicle: for example, the Holy Grail in *War in Heaven*, the Angelic Hierarchy of Dionysius the Areopagite in *The Place of the Lion*, and the Tarot deck and golden images of *The Greater Trumps*. The point should be made that none of these vehicles exists merely as an end in itself or to beguile the reader into a fanciful escape. Rather, each serves to heighten and dramatize moral issues. Charles Moorman correctly argues that: "The focus of interest in the novels is always on the earthly characters themselves and on their reactions to the sudden revelations of the supernatural forces that surround them."<sup>3</sup> Lord Arglay symbolizes the justice and lawfulness so essential to post-Edenic, fallen man; Chloe symbolizes the loving submission and self-sacrifice which surpasses even

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Moorman, *Arthurian Triptych* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1960), p. 85.



the greatness of the Chief Justice. By her immolation in the great stone of Solomon at the climactic moment of the novel, Chloe ensures the restoration of the created universe to its divinely ordained plan.

Williams' employment of hand imagery throughout *Many Dimensions* is enriched by a knowledge of traditional symbolic associations of the hand. The hand has been associated with the spiritual state of the individual and humanity. The Jungian view of the "generative significance" of the hand is applicable as well.<sup>4</sup> Of numerous Biblical allusions one thinks of the Twenty-fourth Psalm with its lines: "Who shall ascend into the hill of the LORD? / Or who shall stand in His holy place? / He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart." Chloe's purity of heart comes at once to mind. Similarly the Thirty-first Psalm with its reference to God as a "strong rock" and the line "Into thine hand I commit my spirit" is relevant. Additionally the "laying on of hands" is alluded to throughout the novel to enrich the textural implications. The spiritual state of both major and minor characters is defined through hand imagery. Thus after Prince Ali's attempt to seize the stone the wise Hajji argues that the young man was in deep error because he "wished to lay violent hands upon the Stone."<sup>5</sup> Chloe survives the Prince's assault on the stone because she "clasps" it not in anger or possessiveness but in loving submission to its will (p. 219). Appropriately the focus is on Ali's fingers and hand as they move through the darkness toward the waiting Chloe and the stone. In contrast to the Prince's motives (which are to return the stone to Allah and protect it from the infidels), the desire for wealth lies behind the schemes of Reginald Montague and Cecilia Sheldrake. Reginald wishes "to lay hands as soon as possible on some of the colossal fortune that seemed to be waiting" by attempting to chip off a segment of the stone (p. 33). Cecilia persists in seeing the stone as "property," a nod, perhaps, in the direction of her American and Lockean heritage (p. 72). Sir Giles Tumulty wishes to possess the stone for its power and wealth-producing capabilities but also as a "scientific" curiosity. The ironies redound for the perceptive reader.

Chloe's hands and gestures are employed so as to secure considerable imagistic variety. In the fifth chapter her hand is the instrument of a mild flirtation with Frank Lindsay

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<sup>4</sup> J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, trans. Jack Sage (New York: Philosophical Library, 1962), pp. 130-131. Subsequent references will appear in the text as "Cirlot" followed by the page number.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Williams, *Many Dimensions* (1931; rpt. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1965), p. 226. Subsequent references will appear in the text.

(p. 71) ; Chloe's gesture is one of goodwill and innocence. Shortly afterward Chloe's hand opens the gate into the Sheldrake property that she may discover what the Americans intend to do about the stone. Chloe is prepared to engage in a harmless trespass and white lie in order to serve what she feels somewhat vaguely to be a higher purpose (p. 71). Later in the novel, as Chloe's psyche falls under Tumulty's insidious powers, her hand becomes the instrument of promiscuous invitation (p. 203). Lord Arglay responds by putting his hand on Chloe's shoulder and expressing faith in her ability to throw off the dark transformation of her personality; Arglay's act is met by the angry demand that he keep his "beastly hands" from her. The Chief Justice, however, asserts both goodwill and strength of character by taking Chloe's wrists and pulling her toward him that she may be brought to her senses. The psychic-spiritual interplay is projected largely through the imagery of hands (pp. 204-205).

Hand imagery operates significantly in the episode in which Chloe and Arglay subject themselves to the mystery of the stone. With her hand on Arglay's and his on the stone, Chloe participates in the ritualized experience that is a step in the path to her archetypal role. Arglay as symbol of justice, law, discipline is essential to Chloe's evolving spiritual maturity. She must overcome darkness and despair in her path toward illumination (pp. 138-139). Arglay's vision is similarly projected through hand imagery. As his experience deepens he becomes aware of the Hajji's hand on his own and of the "intruding" hand of Sir Giles reaching to possess the stone. The crisis ends as the Chief Justice awakens to find that his and Chloe's hands are "closely interlocked" about the stone; and at the conclusion of the episode Arglay gently places their hands in their original positions (pp. 141-143). In chapter fifteen Arglay perceives something of the importance of Chloe's role as mediator of chaos and order as he ponders the profound identity between Chloe's hand and the "Hand thrust out from a cloud in many an early painting to image the Power behind creation" (p. 230).

In the dream-vision experienced by Chloe in chapter eleven hand imagery is again at the center. The heroine's epiphany moves from surface to depth, from a terrifying multiplicity to an archetypal vision of order and serenity as embodied in King Solomon enthroned and bearing upon his head the crowned stone. The vision is framed between hand images. The initial image serves to mark the point of lapse of consciousness into a depth of unconsciousness sufficient for the mind's latent powers

to free themselves for symbolic interplay: "Half-unconsciously her hand felt for it (the stone) where it lay under her pillow in its silken veil, and as she touched it sleep or some other healing power flowed through her" (p. 167). The release which accompanies the joining of Chloe's hands (her being) and the stone points to the greater release and triumph which comes with her immolation. The vision culminates as the King raises his right hand in an act which fills Chloe's dream with a sense "of satisfaction entire and exquisite, as if desires beyond her knowledge had been evoked and contented at once, a perfect apprehension, a longing and a fulfillment" (p. 169). Insofar as the raised hand symbolizes "voice and song" it brings the imagery of hand and utterance together (Cirlot, p. 131).

As preparation for her final submission to the stone Chloe ritualistically joins her hands to Arglay's in such a manner that the stone passes from the Chief Justice to her. Chloe's role as priestess and as a Christ figure is suggested in her act of offering the stone to "all those who for any purpose of good or evil had laid their hands or fixed their desire" upon it (p. 259). As well, there is a hint of the maternal in the description of Chloe's caress of the stone. Williams' heroine is not only the archetypal savior but at another level the archetypal earth mother. At yet another level Chloe's entry into the divine plentitude implies her triumph over the psychic imbalance which has raged within her in the form of Sir Giles as Jungian shadow or Freudian id. Hand imagery is carefully wrought into the description of the twin movements of the Mystery into and out of the stone (pp. 260-261). As the "image" of first matter safely returns to its proper "position" in the divinely ordered cosmos, Chloe's hands become empty; her task is complete and she may now leave her "mortal master" Arglay for union with the maker of all Images—the Deity. Chloe's death restores the universe to life.

**I**MAGES of mouth, speech, and breath are carefully controlled by Williams not only to differentiate surface mannerisms of his characters but more importantly to reveal their spiritual states. Dante's comment that "The soul demonstrates herself in the mouth, as colour under glass" comes to mind.<sup>6</sup> Biblical admonitions that "Excellent speech becometh not a fool" (Proverbs 17, 7) and "Let your speech *be* always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Charles Williams, *The Figure of Beatrice: A Study of Dante* (New York: Noonday Press, 1961), p. 65.

every man" (Col. 4, 6) are similarly to the point. Sir Giles Tumulty's persistently hyperbolic, imprecatory, and violent mode of speech points to his spiritual imbalance and ultimate ruin. Frank Lindsay, Garterr Browne and others pervert the ends of speech for purposes of deceit and equivocation. Lord Arglay typically speaks in an elevated and restrained style which reflects the integrity and reasonableness of his mind, a mind disciplined to truth at whatever personal cost. The Chief Justice's measured way of speaking secures respect for the word and reason and reinforces his symbolic function as Justice and Order. Indeed the Chief Justice *is* his way of speaking, *is* embodied Justice. When Arglay learns that Reginald Montague has been murdered, he typically blames himself even though he could not have prevented the act. Arglay accuses himself of having been a mere "useless loquacity" (p. 233). Only the casual reader of *Many Dimensions* will underestimate the severity of the Chief Justice's self-judgment. Arglay is linked to the imagistic value of silence as a foreshadowing of his attendance on Chloe's immolation at the climax. In the presence of Montague's "futile and spasmodic volubility" the Justice wishes to "have his own silence buttressed" by the presence of Chloe (p. 36).

Chloe learns that there are times when silence joined to action is more important than verbal response. Thus in chapter eight the heroine acts to thwart the intentions of Sir Giles while the other figures can react only by impotent exclamations or open-mouthed dismay. In the episode Tumulty succeeds in cutting Chloe's hand with a knife but is prevented by her from desecrating the stone. Imagistically the action brings together Chloe's efficacious silence and the hand bloodied by Tumulty's assault. Chloe's martyrdom is foreshadowed and the imagery of hands brought into the action (pp. 120-121). For a time Sir Giles' machinations are successful; he manages to "enter" Chloe's psyche by means of the talismanic stone. His encroachment is projected in part through mouth imagery. The benevolent Hajji notes that Chloe's mouth (and eyes) has become "curious and greedy—even malicious"; and he perceives that the visible change signifies a psychic throe (p. 201). One recalls that Sir Giles thinks of the mouth as a "filthy gasbag" (p. 11). And appropriately Sir Giles's death is marked by a "raucous scream" (p. 246) in contrast to the gentle passing of Chloe.

Images of breath and rhythmic movement work suggestively throughout *Many Dimensions* and point to both Biblical sources and those of traditional symbolism. One finds that "Symbolically, to breathe is to assimilate spiritual power" and that



"difficulty in breathing may therefore symbolize difficulty in assimilating the principles of the spirit and of the cosmos" (Cirlot, p. 31). Breath imagery operates effectively in the episode in which Prince Ali attempts to steal the type from Chloe as she lies in her bedroom. As Chloe submits her fate to the will of the stone her breathing modulates from the panting of fear to the calm and assurance of deep and regular exhalation. In contrast, Prince Ali's expenditure of breath in the burglary effort leads swiftly to his irrevocable "expiration" outside Mrs. Webb's house (pp. 219-220).

Chloe's death brings her at last fully into the divine, the ineffable. Her giving up of the ghost, her exhalation of the *spiritus*, stands as powerfully moving because of the cumulative effect of images of mouth, speech, and breath. Appropriately the final movement of Chloe's mouth is imaged this way: "She sighed deeply, and murmured something indistinguishable. So, on the moment, she died" (p. 267). In conclusion one may say that much of the tautness and resonance of *Many Dimensions* comes from Charles Williams' careful artistry and discipline. Thematic and symbolic dimensions combine to give the reader an experience at once spiritually profound and aesthetically ordered.

## Snow

PHILIP K. JASON

The snow was forecast, and I dared the town  
to shave and muddy it with plow and sand.  
I've only dreamed of that long trailing gown  
of white doing its will, but never scanned

a field to its horizon without the stain  
of rough trucks mastering it back again  
for our convenience, if only one small lane.  
Snow has no earthly use for earthly man.

It fell while engines gunned along the shoulder strip;  
it covered branches while the gears engaged.  
The snow was eaten, and the eater's lip  
kept its dumb course, not threatened nor assuaged.

## April 22, 1970 (Earth Day)

PHILIP K. JASON

Ten years ago we chased  
each other down on Hudson Street,  
arm-wrestled in the White Horse  
over rounds of beer.

Ten years ago the Beats  
were tarnished, but still visible.  
We'd see them in the Cedar Bar  
and tasted lustre in decay.

We all had spiral notebooks then,  
and littered all the avenues  
with jottings toward the absolute.  
We talked about Albert Camus  
each day. Each day we shed  
our mufflers, socks, devices  
for rebellion. We would shed  
our skins.

Today, in Maryland,  
I check my house for crevices  
and howl at the resistance  
of hard acid ground  
to take my seeds.

In the newspaper I read  
where kids are kneeling  
in the streets and wading  
in the streams; their fingers  
rooting out, repealing,  
if only incrementally,  
earth's bunions. In fever,  
this Spring, they have given  
the old globe a new legend  
of itself. In an enormous ring  
of hands the earth is set.

# Viewing

K. C. FREDERICK

ON the screen was a patch of forest so thick with vegetation that nothing much was visible at first but a dense mass of green that gave the picture something of an underwater quality. The faint vertical lines of the tree trunks were broken by the layers of nearer foliage and a dark horizontal mass buried in the shade was at first undecipherable: it might have been the hull of a ship sunk in the forest that Bill and Vera peered at uncertainly. At last Bill ventured, "Is that a wall?" and Beth, invisible behind the projector, answered, "Yes. This picture isn't from our trip," she explained. "Howard took it about a year ago. It's in Connecticut." All at once they could see that it was an arrangement of piled stones, though long since covered with lichen and for all practical purposes a natural configuration. Beth went on determinedly, since this was the first slide and it hadn't begun to trouble her yet. "There used to be farms in that part of the state two hundred years ago," she said, "but the farmers left as soon as better land was available in the west, and now you can find traces of the walls they put up in the middle of the forest." She paused as if to give them time to nod in the darkened room. "Somehow those woods used to make Howard very hopeful. He'd read that more of the northeast is forested now than at any time since colonial days." She was conscious of quoting Howard at this point. "There was one thing especially that struck him," she went on, almost with surprise, "as the farmland turns back into forest pheasants are getting scarce because the pheasant's not a native bird and doesn't naturally live in the woods. But as they disappear they're being replaced by the wild turkey, which used to be plentiful in colonial times." As she said it it struck her as an absurd thing to be hopeful about, particularly since the Howard she was quoting wasn't the same man who'd stare for what seemed like hours

at nothing at all—no, the Howard who was hopeful about turkeys was a different man. “It was like a rebirth, he used to say,” she finished, but there was little hope in her voice.

“But you said this *wasn't* from your trip?” Bill asked.

“No.” Beth sounded as if she’d stepped back a few paces. “But he arranged all these slides.”

“Well,” Vera said, “it’s beautiful.” She seemed to be signaling for a change of scene, but the hidden wall remained on the screen for long and silent seconds, like a cynical comment on Howard’s hopes.

Bill stirred uncomfortably. “It won’t be so bad,” he’d said to Vera, but he was beginning to fear it would be as bad as he’d expected. Dinner had been bearable because there was the food and the dishes between them but now that Howard, so to speak, was back, they wouldn’t get off cheaply. Bill, who had a big face that he’d always regarded as a kind of embarrassing intrusion, ran his hand up his cheek as if to hide it, even though it was dark and there was no one beside him but Vera. He felt uneasy, vaguely guilty and awed by the presence of the dead. As though it might somehow exonerate him of the injustice of being alive, he concentrated his pity for his old friend. “Poor bastard,” he said to himself.

The machine clicked and at last the second-growth woods were replaced by a sad, broken-down street of red-brick buildings. Beth, whose voice had recovered a little authority, explained that it was a town in upstate New York. While the scene could be called quaint, the slides that followed communicated a sense of empty, torpid stillness: it looked as if nothing could move in this old village. The pictures had been taken near sunset and the strange, muted light transformed the brick into an unreal, somehow heavier substance and the long shadows made solid black bars across the picture, as if to further weigh down the already immobile buildings. Beth identified the pictures and the guests made conventional exclamations, but she hardly heard them. What she remembered of upstate New York, at the beginning of the trip, was her hope and enthusiasm. It had seemed possible then that the black cloud that had hung over her husband could be lifted as they drove west into the increasing sunshine and warmth. She had wanted the trip herself; she’d promoted it so strongly that for a time she’d naturally blamed herself and the trip for what had happened, though that explanation wasn’t really convincing because what had happened was so final and extreme that it could only be called a mystery, an event that she couldn’t understand but could only accept. Accepting came



naturally to Beth. She had never been pretty and all through her adolescence she'd believed that that didn't matter; when she found that it mattered more than anything she was shocked, but she'd learned to live with this new, painful truth. When Howard had married her she felt she didn't understand him, but she supposed few people really did understand others, and it hadn't mattered because they'd had more than twenty-five successful years together, they'd raised a son to manhood (there was pain in every direction thought took) and if there had been many setbacks, still, life went on in a manageable way—or did until recently—and understanding hadn't seemed that important. But now—

"I'm sorry," she sighed, "I don't know if this is the right thing to do."

Bill cleared his throat. "I think Howard would have wanted it this way." His voice had the sincerity of someone who was trying to convince himself.

Vera didn't look at him in the dark. God, she thought, he can be awful at times. Certain remarks like "I don't think I've *ever* been happier," or "sadder" or "more surprised in my entire life" embarrassed her. They were so exaggerated they made her wrinkle her nose in disdain every time she heard them; and reading the minds of dead people somehow fell into that category. For herself, she wasn't at all sure Howard would have wanted it this way. She'd always been fond of him because of his reserve. It was true that his reserve had held him back, it had prevented him from getting farther along in his job when he had all the qualifications; but there was a kind of gentleness about him that she'd valued even though she realized now that it had ticketed him for failure from the beginning. Vera had her own theories about Howard's lack of success, one of which was that Beth was partially to blame for not giving him a gentle push here and there. Vera thought sentimentally of Howard: he'd just turned fifty and was entering the age he'd seemed to be born for: his pleasant, lived-in look, his reserve, his gracious manners, would have earned him respect in his later years, but instead there was this.

"What a pity!" she said aloud.

"I really thought he was getting better," Beth sighed, grasping at the opportunity to express what was on her mind. "The doctor said a trip west was a fine idea, he practically promised it would help." On the screen was a brick nineteenth-century courthouse in an upstate New York village. "I thought

so too," she said, "seeing new things—he was so depressed toward the end."

"About his job?" Bill asked quietly.

"About his job, about the state of the country—everything." There was a note of wildness just below the weary surface of her voice. "He—just seemed to lose interest. He talked a lot about what he'd do when he retired. And then, he started to do a lot of reading. Didn't he ever talk to you about his reading?" she asked Bill almost challengingly.

"No," he answered, looking into the projector's beam. "No, he didn't." Bill felt slightly ashamed, as if he'd failed a test. "What kind of reading?"

"Oh, all kinds of books," Beth said. "Life on other planets, the fall of the Roman Empire." The topics seemed embarrassingly pompous for the familiar living room, and they were silent for a while as the old courthouse continued to occupy the screen. "He said nobody seems to know why the Roman Empire fell," she said in a puzzled voice. It seemed like the perfect comment to prolong the silence, which it did. At last there was a click and the scene shifted to a dirty, empty street in a much larger city. "Detroit," Beth told them. Once again the photographer seemed to have gone out of his way to find the most desolate places: burned-out buildings, barred storewindows, garbage in the streets.

"I visited an uncle in Detroit when I was a girl," Vera said. "It was a nice city. There were lots of trees."

"Never been there," Bill said, and he was relieved when the scene shifted to a small midwestern town, because as long as the pictures kept changing they were getting nearer the end. It was all very depressing. He was thinking that Howard's trouble must have started with Chris's death. Chris had been the perfect son, so unlike Bill's kids, and then, to have him—his only child—killed in a plane crash the day after he'd graduated from college—God, how could you ever get over a thing like that?

The pictures changed more quickly now: little towns, treeless prairies, farms. Beth identified them all. Then there was a series of shots of the Amana colonies in Iowa, substantial, quaint little villages with a distinctive architecture that spoke of the rural life and homely virtues. "I remember what he said when we were here," Beth said. "He told me the farther west we went the farther into the past we seemed to be going. I told him not to be so sure, because I always thought the west was more progressive than the east, but it seemed as if, once he got that idea in his head, that was all he ever looked for."

"I guess a guy sees what he wants to," Bill said.

Beth felt a wave of bitterness rising. All her life, it seemed, she'd known pain and forbearance. By temperament she was quiet and restrained, as life had taught her to be; but she'd always been willing to surrender the present, to regard it as unreal, in anticipation of some future time when she could begin all over with a completely different life. She'd looked forward to a day when she didn't have to put up with things anymore, when she could throw her feet up on the table and cut loose. Though she herself was discreet she cheered vulgarity and wished it well: pink-wigged grandmas living it up in Miami were her patron saints. She could adapt to anything, she felt. Even the death of Chris, terrible as it was, was something you had to live with, and five years had transformed the pain into a tender memory. She felt no guilt, she had been a good mother. If her only child had been taken away, the same and worse had happened to other women. But Howard's death was another thing. Strangely enough, he was no longer physically real to her; she kept forgetting little details about him. His suicide was a condition, like her plainness, that she could learn to live with. But the consequences were frightening. Never again could she count on anything, even such small goals as she'd had. When he'd started talking about retirement Howard had sometimes spoken about buying a farm in the country and living the simple, primitive life; but Beth didn't want to live the simple, primitive life. She'd worked too hard for that. She enjoyed reading the ads for a retirement village where people did everything for you, like picking you up and driving you to the supermarket. It would be nice to have people do things for you for a change.

Meanwhile she dutifully went on with the slides that showed a succession of dreary farm houses so alone and exposed on the prairie their situation seemed almost dangerous. Beth said very little about these pictures, since they were so much alike they might all have been taken in the same place, and the farmhouses followed each other rapidly, to the click of the slide-projector. It was like an uncomfortable bus-ride through a desolate stretch of country that seems to go on forever. In her silence Beth knew that the others could see there was something odd, something crazy in the angles and the perspectives of the pictures. The houses were never centered properly and each shot gave the impression of a great amount of sky about to come crashing down on the frail buildings. Sometimes the picture was tilted, so that the land looked as if it were going to slide right out of the frame.

"No wonder you can't keep 'em down on the farm," Bill muttered, feeling he had to say something. The pictures evoked a bleak hopelessness, and the fact that he was looking at them instead of looking out from them gave him some satisfaction. His life hadn't been a roaring success up to now, but at least he wasn't stuck like that. Somehow the thought made him realize how much he really missed Howard. Howard's relative failure had always made Bill feel a little more comfortable in his job, but he'd been surprised after the suicide to discover how much Howard had meant to him personally. And the taking of his own life had suddenly transformed Howard into a figure of almost awesome proportions: the surprising absoluteness of the act had instantly conferred upon him something of the status of a celebrity. "I didn't know Howard had it in him," Bill kept saying to himself and the fact that Howard had had it in him, that there was more to him than most people, including Bill, had realized, converted his sudden departure into an even sharper loss. Bill was troubled to think that the "seriousness" of Howard's last months, the occasional lapses into open melancholy, were the signs of a despair whose true depths he never revealed. Bill looked at the pictures of ramshackle houses. A solemn mood came over him. Thinking again of Howard's terrible action, he pulled himself erect.

The drab, lonely farmhouses irritated Vera. They were somehow connected with Howard's talking about retirement at his age. Why, she was practically fifty and Bill would be next month. Retirement would come soon enough, she knew, and then again it might never come at all. Moping about the past was bad enough, but putting your trust in the future was almost worse. Vera hated the past and didn't believe in the future; only the present was real to her. Yes, she had plans: when Bill retired they'd sell the house and buy a trailer and just travel around—anywhere, though the gambling casinos of Nevada would be high on the list. They certainly wouldn't loiter around dying villages in the Midwest. Yes, she had her plans but she didn't depend on them. Maybe she had only a year to live: if so, she wanted to live in that year. She'd learned one secret long ago, that life could get oppressively boring if you let it, and she'd rather be shot, she often said, than bored.

To Beth the silence of the guests matched the pictures, because it was on the plains that she realized at last that the trip wasn't curing Howard. The long silences seemed to grow out of the landscape, and they were almost worse than the apprehension that would rise at night, the fear of tornadoes, for instance,



that kept him awake, nervously twirling the dial of the transistor radio for news that the tornado watch had ended.

"Those houses give me the creeps," Vera said, and it was like a swift thundershower after a day of gathering humidity. Beth sighed, grateful again to Vera for having impulsively said what she'd wanted to say.

"Howard always did like older things, didn't he?" Bill said.

"That's true," Beth acknowledged, "but old things aren't necessarily gloomy."

Vera broke in as if from another conversation. "Give me something new over something old anytime." She retreated a little. "I mean, of course Howard was a fine man and everybody's got the right to his own taste but—" she caught herself, ending by repeating weakly, "give me the new thing." What she'd meant to say was that old things were associated in her mind with death, and long ago she'd decided she'd had enough of death. All through her young years death had hounded her family like a schoolyard bully, and it had seemed as if she'd spent half of her girlhood getting ready for funerals. Ever since then she could only think of death with irritation and impatience. Its presence was like that of ants at a picnic: you might have to put up with it, but nobody said you had to like it. Even her tender feeling toward Howard was a little tarnished by what he'd done last month. She could forgive him for it because she'd liked him, but it was still, after all, an offense.

"What's that?" Bill asked about a picture that showed men in cowboy hats crossing a western street in front of a large cage in the corner. Beth explained that during Frontier Days in this forgotten town anyone caught on the streets without western wear would be tried in a Kangaroo court and locked up in that "jail" for a short period. As the pictures moved westward the joyless pattern continued. There were many shots of desert landscapes, some of which were incidentally beautiful, but it was obviously not the beauty that had attracted the photographer. Beth was embarrassed by how blatant Howard's jaundice appeared to be, how many brown mountains and lonely trains and salt flats were clustered together in almost a parody of the feeling that was destroying him at the time. Though she didn't understand it she tried to respect it and checked her feeling of oppression, holding the scenes on the screen a moment longer than she wanted to.

"It was no use trying to tell him to look for the cheerful things," she said absently.

Suddenly there was a group of slides that were filled with

people. There was a Mississippi river boat, an old mine train, a street from the '90's, a smugglers' cave—even Abraham Lincoln.

"That *must* be Disneyland," Vera guessed. It was.

"It looks like fun," Bill said unconvincingly. Beth said nothing. In her silence she'd seemed to have grown more somber.

The scene shifted to San Diego, where an old airplane stood in the midst of a museum of airplanes. "The only exact replica of *The Spirit of St. Louis* that's actually been flown," Beth said. Her voice was tense, strained. "A very funny thing happened in that museum," she continued. She wasn't supposed to talk like this, she knew, but she'd held back long enough. God knows she'd been left with little: all she could count on was sympathy and she'd take as much as she could get. "This museum seemed to affect Howard in a strange way. He was very quiet all the while and when he came out he looked white and scared. He said he'd had this horrible feeling of staleness. It's really an old-fashioned museum, even though they have some missiles and space-capsules. Mostly it's old planes and Howard said that when we were standing before one of them this feeling came over him: he said he felt he'd been there before, he said his father had taken him to an airport once when he was very small and the planes had looked like this. He said the whole feeling came back. I don't know why that would upset him but it did, awfully. He said it made him feel stale. If you'd seen his face—it looked as if he was suffocating."

"That's terrible," Vera said quietly. "Poor guy," Bill said. Still Beth didn't feel any better because, even though she couldn't understand the feeling she could sympathize, just as the others could; but she knew that the slides were moving into a region where it was difficult even to sympathize anymore. She switched the pictures rapidly now, aware that the pattern was changing: people were long gone but now even the landscape was banished. What followed was a series of man-made images: a giant empty-eyed farmer on the side of the road, holding an ear of corn, innumerable cowboys, some beckoning the driver to gambling halls with wooden windmill arms, others hulking before gas-stations. There were many figures of Indians too, mounted and standing, proud and dignified or comic and grotesque. Interspersed among these were "serious" works like the sower of seed high atop the Nebraska capital building or the golden angel Moroni gleaming brilliantly above the tabernacle in Salt Lake City—it was an impossible conglomeration of figures, good, bad and indifferent, reflecting every mood: a pale stone Christ standing before the blue-domed background of the universe was

followed, for instance, by a large fat boy vacantly eating a hamburger. Weather-beaten gold mines, freshly painted outlaws and sleeping Mexicans fading in the sun all occupied the screen for a moment, then vanished with a click. Beth had seen it all before, and she was no longer surprised, but it depressed her nevertheless. Howard had robbed her even of her memory of the trip with the shape he'd put on it and in a numb, uncomprehending way she resented it. But she fought the feeling: he was, she reminded herself, disturbed.

"That's sort of—funny," Vera said without laughing as the screen showed a dust-coated prospector dancing a frozen jig. In fact she found this part of the show strangely disturbing. These blank images of lifeless people scared her, and what they suggested about Howard was frightening too. It was a dead man who'd taken these pictures, she told herself, and death seemed to emanate from the images like a stench. She felt the comfort of having Bill sitting next to her, a man who, whatever else you could say about him, was at least alive. A feeling of how awful it must be for Beth began to take shape, but Vera ruthlessly pushed it away. There were things she didn't want to think about just now, because her mind was occupied by Bill. She was suddenly concerned and anxious about him, and she decided to get him to go for his long-delayed physical right away. He was, after all, and had been, all she had. It had surprised her that she'd never cared as much for her children as a mother is supposed to, but because of that their rebelling and taking up an entirely different way of life never troubled or pained her as it did their father and, in fact, maybe that was why she was at least able to talk to them now. Yet, though that was good that wasn't the important thing: what was important was that she and Bill were still together. They'd go places and each would be interested in totally different things, but they'd be there together, and that was worth a lot to Vera. She touched his hand in the dark.

Bill hardly felt it. He was looking at a figure of an outlaw with a noose around his neck. Beth had just explained that when you put a nickel in a slot he'd drop and writhe in the agonies of hanging. Bill thought he knew why Howard had taken that picture: because it summed up his life. All through the showing Bill had felt he was on the verge of some general conclusion and now he knew what it was: that there were two kinds of people in the world, the lucky and the unlucky. Howard, with Chris, with his job, with—with what happened to him, Howard was unlucky. Still, if that was true what did it mean about



himself? Could he think of himself as a lucky guy? That was a new thought but it might, surprisingly, be true. Like with his two kids. What father could have more grief or heartbreak from the way they turned out? Still, they were alive. When you thought of Chris—where there's life, there's hope, that was certainly true. On the surface Bill was a straight forward, no-nonsense kind of guy, but he had his secret terrors, his superstitions that only Vera knew about. Maybe knowing about himself had made him overrate his problems. God, what kind of secret fears had Howard had, what terrors did Beth know about? To think of himself as lucky was a new thing to Bill and he wanted to ponder the idea when he got back home. Just the thought of it, though, made him experience a rush of self-confidence: in the dark he felt he was taller and leaner.

But for Beth the very worst was now impending, the final sequence that she'd seen several times already, always with a kind of paralyzing shock. The last slides puzzled, bewildered and irritated her, they embarrassed her. The pictures had seemed innocent enough when they were taken, but their being grouped together this way was almost diabolical. They seemed to put Howard even beyond the reach of her pity, they seemed to have been taken by one of those inhabitants of another planet that he'd been so interested in during his last months. It didn't help Beth to dismiss this final series as "the zoo."

It began with a rabbit, tall as a man and, as the picture made quite clear, the animal was covered with real fur. Somehow in its vacancy it looked more self-possessed than the few people who stood nearby with cameras around their necks. There were horses of plaster, wood and stone, a great many in succession, of all colors and in a variety of poses. What they symbolized, the motives of their makers, was not always clear from the picture. One in particular seemed very tall and stood on a pedestal, like the statue of a prominent citizen erected as a reminder to a later age of the virtues he'd exemplified. Other horses, less noble, cheaper, were placed in front of service stations and roadhouses like worms on a hook, crude, unhorselike creatures that had the look of mutations. There were cows, too, standing before restaurants, some of them longhorned, others more familiarly farmy. One wore an apron and winked, another's body was divided into butcher's cuts of beef. But there was one that peered directly into the camera, so close that Howard must have stood face to face with it. It was impossible to estimate its size, but the screen was almost entirely filled by the large, lifeless head that was the color of bad meat. From



a glimpse of the brown, dusty landscape behind the brown, dusty ear you could tell it stood somewhere in the southwest. Its eyes, a pair of chalky red zeroes, looked out with a bold, blind persistence toward the camera. There was something frightening in that look: it was like the stare of a rock. More animals followed in quick succession: "cute" deer, a grey stone buffalo on a pedestal, a gigantic polar bear rearing before a hotel, a dinosaur towering above a prairie intersection, even a fantastic creature called the "jackalope," a combination of a jack-rabbit and an antelope, that sat on its haunches, tall and saucy, in the middle of the main street of a small Wyoming town.

Bill knew that the animals were unlucky charms. He felt very sorry for his friend and angry at the company he'd worked for. Howard had been blocked in his job: if those bastards had been fair and promoted him none of this would have happened, Bill was convinced, and the sudden, generous thought surprised and moved him, so that he felt tears coming to his eyes. "Howard was a real friend," he told himself, "one in a million."

Looking at these strange creatures was very difficult for Vera. They were gross and obscene, they upset her. In her distress she blamed Beth, she blamed Howard, she would blame anyone if it meant the show would be over at last.

It was going to be over soon, Beth knew, and again she'd learned she could survive it. It was practically the one thing she learned in life, that you can survive anything, but it was a knowledge without consolation. Always since she'd known Howard she'd realized that she had to put up with things, had to be alone. He left her many times, not physically, but he had a way of taking his mind somewhere else, leaving her to make do on her own. Yes, she'd been willing to do all that, but not for nothing. Her eyes began to blur as she thought again of all her losses, of the retirement village where they drove you to the supermarket. She would never have that now, she believed, and the bitterness returned. As the horrible animals succeeded each other on the screen she began to cry—oh, she could survive it, but why did she have to? Beth hardly noticed the bust of the ape from the San Diego zoo that closed out the slide sequence and was followed by the brilliant blank rectangle of the empty screen.

Vera rushed up to her, saying softly, "There, there." Bill turned on the lights and helped Vera lead Beth to the sofa. "It must have been an awful strain," he said. They poured some drinks and before long Beth had calmed down; they told stories about the old times, sometimes quietly and tenderly, sometimes with gusts of laughter; and when Bill and Vera finally got up

to leave they all knew that it had been a good idea to get together.

That night Vera woke up from a dream, gasping. Bill numbly flicked on the light. "It was that horrible cow's face," Vera explained. Bill laughed, "You're dreaming of me again," and Vera smiled tightly. "Want me to turn out the light?" he asked a few moments later, and she nodded. If it had been a few years ago they might have smoked a cigarette together and maybe made love. Now they lay back, thinking their separate thoughts that would lead them back to different sleeps, but for each it was consoling to have the other nearby.

Beth wasn't awakened by the cowface. She'd looked at it a great deal already and it no longer scared her.

## The Beach

JOSEPH E. MEREDITH

We amble crumbling shale  
in negative communion  
to the mirroring water's edge  
and, like the screeching gulls that sail  
in wheels above our heads,  
stand inverted in the other's sight,  
silent as the sandfleas—  
a hermit's isolation  
with not a shell's respite!

The water waves us up-side-down  
(we fall, unconscious of the loss).  
The last of our humility disowned,  
we die as slow as Simon  
inverted on the cross.

# A Little Work in the Garden

ALAN BRODY

ONE thing was sure: these Sundays had to stop.

Bernie Cass heard his grandchildren calling him inside and turned the knob on the porch door so the lock would not click. He went up the driveway toward the toolshed, zipping his lumber jacket closed. Even that he did quietly. Usually he sneaked upstairs for a nap, but today a little work in the garden was what he needed.

It was mid-November. There had been frost in the air for the past three weeks. He had been meaning to get to the vegetable garden and turn it over so it would be ready for spring. It had been an incredibly rich summer. The corn stood straight and thick; the cucumber leaves had lain over the plot until there was no trace of uncovered earth; the tomatoes had grown to the size of two fists and ripened on the vine. He had had to replace their supports three times, the last with the highest and strongest he'd ever used. He had hoped to show it all to Brenda and the children. Now it didn't matter. He even felt a little foolish at the idea of showing it off to his daughter, proud like a child is proud of his first drawing. After this afternoon, though, he couldn't get it cleared fast enough, as though he had to bury the evidence of his own enthusiasm and naivete before they humiliated him with that, too.

He shuffled through ankle-high drifts of leaves, trying to silence the crackle beneath his shoes. He looked up briefly. The sky was a perfect arch, empty, ice-blue and translucent. It smelled sharp and thin and stung his knuckles.

Bernie was fifty-eight. He was balding. The hair he did have left had been blond, but it had gradually lightened until now it was no color at all. His eyes were light blue, almost gray, and his face round. Clean-shaven, as it was this afternoon, it looked smooth and firm. Sometimes, though, and more often

lately when he was tired, the flesh around his cheeks would relax. It would sag slightly, just enough to draw the rest of his face down with it. Then his eyes seemed to lose all their color, too, and his mouth turned thin and tight between the delicate suggestion of jowls.

Bernie had once come upon himself in a mirror looking like that. He came away, thinking, "That is what I will look like when I am old." Afterward, he avoided looking closely, even when he shaved. He was approaching that odd, unsettling time when he could never be sure from one day to the next, whether he looked like he did when he was young or like he would when he got old.

There were many things he avoided in the same way he avoided mirrors. May, his wife, knew this and it had become, after thirty-five years, a controlling principle of their life together. She was his guardian and censor, uncannily expert at timing family news. Revelations about births, deaths, marriages, divorces always reached him at his most invulnerable, when they could pass into his mind without a jolt. Those things May did not control, those stray experiences he came upon without her, Bernie himself had learned to deal with through an intricate network of defenses and evasions. It had developed, finally, into a peculiar habit of never allowing his eyes to rest on one thing. He had a constant shifting glance that looked at first like the sign of a restlessly searching mind; it was really the sign of a determinedly virgin one. With May's help, Bernie had reached the age of fifty-eight and remained an innocent.

That was one of the reasons he could not handle the shame and anger he felt today. It was unnatural. That was what bothered him so. If it were just that he wanted to be alone, he would not have cared. Every man wants to be alone. But he did not simply want to be alone. He wanted to get away—away from May, away from Brenda, away from Charles, God knew, but especially away from the children. That was what was unnatural and that was why, even as he puttered inside the toolshed, he could feel his face growing more and more tired.

Bernie adored his grandchildren. Days before they came to visit, he and May would be filled with excitement. After they left, the house would feel empty and they would moon about like restless children themselves. It was only while they were all together that everything was wrong. Erica and Daniel were vital, considerate, bright. When they came to him they seemed always to run with their arms extended, carrying all their enthusiasm in a single armload, happy to pour it into his lap.



That only made it harder to comprehend the constant, gnawing need to turn away every time he had to confront them, to escape the warmth that quivered in the very air around them, to run from them the way he used to run in dreams.

It was warm inside the shed. Bernie lingered in the close, dusty air precisely arranging his garden tools in the wheelbarrow.

And there was Charles, too. He had tried to like him. From the very first he had made an effort to welcome him into the family as though he were one of his own children. He had thrown open his house, his checkbook, his refrigerator. Nothing happened, except that Brenda seemed to grow more detached, until she, too, began to look like a stranger.

Bernie could even remember liking Charles. The first time Brenda brought him home, May had noticed how much like a young Bernie he was. He had the same, straw colored hair and open, astonished eyes. Bernie was secretly delighted at the idea that Brenda could fall in love with a young version of himself. But it did not last long.

Charles was a plastics salesman when he married Brenda. Four months later he left that to open his own hardware store, only to sell it again in less than a year. It had done badly. He sold it to a chain which had the capital to make it thrive and started taking a correspondence course for a C.P.A. He never finished. Instead, he went into partnership with an old high school friend and opened the Moonhaven, a catering service on Dyckman Street that specialized in Italian weddings, confirmation breakfasts and silver anniversaries. He was like that. He couldn't even stay in the same room more than five minutes. Whenever Bernie went to his house there was always a ladder up somewhere and a half painted wall. It bothered him to think Brenda had to live like that. She always seemed to be waiting for something to get done. Always uncertain. She was too much like Bernie to be happy that way. Bernie liked certainty. He liked a good, clear beginning marked with a heavy black line and an end you could check off. Charles's habit of leaving his life up in the air every other weekend was intolerable. Every time he came to Bernie with a new scheme, Bernie thought, "This time I will tell him that he's got to stop." He never did. The children came and Brenda grew more tired and frightened looking and Charles rolled smugly along from disaster to disaster.

He had stayed with the Moonhaven a year and a half, though, and it had looked like this might finally be the answer. Bernie didn't think much of catering as a profession. It seemed

too frantic. He imagined Charles in a white apron and a bow tie, running around a huge, dirty kitchen, uncovering pots and smelling steam from the soup. But at least there was some hope that he could settle down and give Brenda a little security.

Bernie sighed and dropped his gardening gloves on the shovel. Today, on top of the guilt and confusion over the children, Charles had to tell him he was selling out to his partner.

Bernie's stomach churned. It was the way Charles had stood there, his hands in his pockets, balancing on his heels, smiling and smug as though he had just brought news of his latest triumph. Bernie had glanced at Brenda for some sign of anger or despair, but she was busy trying to keep Erica still while she pinned her hair back. So Bernie had stood there, helpless, while Charles grinned away another chance for certainty and ground his heels into the new living room carpet.

There was a knock at the door of the toolshed. "Bernie?"

It was May's voice.

"Bernie?"

Bernie went on piling his tools in the wheelbarrow.

"If you don't want me to come in you'd better say something, because if you don't I'm going to figure you're not there and come in to make sure."

"I'm here," Bernie grumbled.

"Can I come in?"

"No."

The door opened and May Cass stepped in. She closed the door carefully behind her. "The children were looking for you."

"I heard them."

"I know. I saw you through the kitchen window." Bernie was polishing a mulcher now. He ran the rag over the prongs with intense concentration. "Do you have any idea how silly you looked, tip-toeing across your own driveway?" Bernie blushed. "My husband, the cat."

She put her hands in the pockets of her coat and leaned against the work table. It was Bernie's tan car-coat she was wearing, the one she had been meaning to throw out for the past ten years. It reached to her knees and the sleeves bunched back as she slipped her hands in the pockets.

"What do you want, May?"

"Come back to the house and stop acting like a baby."

"I've got to get the garden turned over."

May examined the wheelbarrow. "What do you need three shovels for?"

"You can never tell."

She raised her eyebrows. Bernie dropped the mulcher on the pile and went behind the wheelbarrow.

"Would you open the door for me, please?" He picked up the handles and waited. May did not move.

"Put the wheelbarrow down, Bernie," she said patiently. "Come back in the house. Your daughter and your grandchildren came here to spend a day with you. You don't go sneaking away to your garden after you haven't seen them for a month and a half."

"Open the door, May."

"What are you doing? Sulking?"

"Old men don't sulk."

"Yes, they do. You're living proof."

He lowered the wheelbarrow. "You think I'm an old man, too."

"I think you're an old baby." She unbuttoned the car-coat. "It's hot in here. You're going to catch cold with that jacket zipped up." She paused. "It's Charles?"

He shrugged.

"I know. Your son-in-law's an idiot. We all know it. As a matter of fact, I never met a man whose son-in-law *wasn't* an idiot. Every year I wonder more and more where all the smart married men come from if everybody's son-in-law is an idiot."

"He shouldn't have said that to me."

"That you don't understand business or that you're an old man?"

Bernie's face stung again. He threw his hands in the air. "Both. Neither. I mean it's not even what he said, but that he had to say it with you and Brenda and the children right there. I mean, what kind of person . . ."

"An idiot son-in-law, that's what kind." She smiled. "I wonder if my mother and father would have talked about you . . ." She shook her head and giggled. "Bernie, come back to the house. Don't let him spoil your day with the children . . ."

"No!" It came out too sharply. May looked at him closely, then drew a deep breath. "What am I going to do with you?"

"Leave me alone."

"You make such problems for yourself." She wandered around the shed, poking at tools. They were all carefully hung and labelled. Bernie had set aside an area for carpentry, another for gardening, a third for electrical work. May unhooked screw drivers, drills, wire clippers, pliers and examined each item as though it were some mysterious, archaeological discovery. Bernie

followed behind, replacing them carefully. "I think you're the neatest human being in the entire world."

"It only takes a minute," he answered mechanically. "Then at least you know where to find whatever you need the next time you need it."

"Except the extra minute." She pulled down a paint brush and put it to her chin. "How would I look with a beard?"

"Stop messing my things."

"Or eyebrows?" She moved the brush around her face. "Or hair in my nose. Did you ever notice people with hair in their nose and ears? They always make me think of barber shops. How would you look with hair?" She tried to put the brush on his head, but he backed away. "You know, that's the one thing I remember about our first date."

"What?"

"How I had the urge to muss your hair. I can't tell you how much I wanted to muss your hair. It was so perfect. Every time you moved, every single, little bitty hair went with you. Not one of them stayed where it was. Not one." She held up the brush and rubbed the bristles. "Blrrrrrr. Like that I wanted to go."

"I would have let you." Bernie took the brush from her.

"But you wouldn't have married me."

"On the first date you didn't know you wanted to marry me."

"Yes, I did. I told you that when Brenda was born. Every woman knows who she wants to marry on the first date. The first minute of the first date. It's the waiting for the man to come around that's so wearing. We know everything before you do," she said lightly.

"Everything?"

"For a fact."

"What do you know now that I don't?"

She laughed. "I know I'm . . ."

"What?"

She waved it away. "You wouldn't believe me."

"I would."

She paused and looked steadily at him. Then she took his face in her hands. "Believe me, you wouldn't." She said it tenderly and kissed him. "You're too neat. Now come on back."

He pulled away. "As soon as I'm finished."

"Now."

"No." He turned away angrily. May watched him in silence. After a moment his shoulders went limp in a gesture of helplessness. "Why does he do that to me?" he asked quietly. "He's



driving me crazy with his running from job to job, nothing ever certain for Brenda, for the children . . .”

“For you, you mean?”

“Me, too.”

“Is it your business?”

“Who loaned him the capital for the hardware store and the Moonhaven?” He turned to her. “Look, it’s not the money. You know that. It’s the way he leaves everything hanging, that’s what I can’t stand. If he finished a job—any job—just once. That’s all I’m asking.”

“You can’t.”

“I’ve got a right.”

“You don’t,” May said simply.

“A thirty year old woman is nobody’s daughter, darling.”

Bernie started to answer, but May did not let him. “You know what we are now,” she continued quietly. “We’re the grandparents. Brenda’s not our responsibility. Neither is Charles. Even the grandchildren. All we’re supposed to do with them is dote and carry on about how special they are and compare them with our friends’ grandchildren and carry fat wallets full of pictures. That’s all. So, you see, your idiot son-in-law was really right. You are an old man. And I’m an old lady. Only he’d never say that to me because he knows I’d belt him.” Bernie smiled. “Not because it’s not true, but because he shouldn’t be disrespectful to a grandmother.”

“You mean I should have hit him?”

“You should have laughed at him. It’s the same thing. But instead you went and let him hurt you. And he didn’t even mean to.” She sighed. “That’s the beauty of Charles.”

Bernie sat down gingerly on the side of the wheelbarrow. “I should have put him in his place.”

“That’s all he was doing with you.”

“I’m not an old man. I’d know it if I were.”

May nodded. “You father isn’t old, either, because he’d know it if he were.”

Bernie laughed. “He’s eighty-two.”

“And he calls his eighty-three year old neighbor ‘the old man’.”

Bernie blinked at her. “You trying to tell me that I really am . . .”

“Nobody can tell you that, love. It’s something you find out for yourself. You know it or you don’t. Like your own dreams. And Charles can’t tell you, either.” She paused. “Or your grandchildren.”

His head shot up. "What do you mean?" he asked guardedly. She closed her eyes and shook her head. "Thirty-five years and you still get shocked when I understand you."

"What? Understand what? Stop with all the wisdom, May," Bernie said impatiently.

"It happened again this morning. I saw it when Brenda and Charles drove up. You wait and you wait and your heart's in your mouth. Then the car stops in the driveway and they climb out and run to you and you open your arms." She raised her arms toward Bernie. "Like this," she said. "But you turn your head away, Bernie. Every time you find some reason not to look."

"I love them."

"You think I don't know that, too? But you turn your head. You never look your grandchildren in the eye. And then you start with the naps or you end up fighting with Charles."

Bernie scraped some rust off the side of the wheelbarrow with his fingernail. There was silence in the shed, "What can I do?" he said.

"Stop torturing yourself."

"It's not natural."

"It's the most natural thing in the world."

"Every single time I try to make it different. I love them. I know I do. And I'm so proud. Everytime I see them they're grown up a little more and I see how . . ." He shook his head.

"What?"

"You'll laugh."

"I'll laugh at Olson and Johnson. Not at you."

"I see how *sure* they are." He put out his hand as though to explain, then let it fall back in his lap. "So sure, May. That's what does it. Every time, that's what makes me turn away like that and eat my heart out. They're so safe. It's like . . ." He floundered. "Like they remember the day they were born." He looked up with those same wide, astonished eyes he had looked at her with so often. "I don't even know what the hell that means." He shrugged. "Everything that makes them beautiful—those skinny legs and the way their shirts are always untucked from playing and the way I can feel their hearts beating when I hug them. Everything that's gorgeous. That's what makes me turn away. Even when I know it's going to happen and I try to stop it. It's like a twitch. I run to meet them and I'm moving backward before I can stop myself. Then I've got to get away. Even while I'm loving them I'm looking for a way

out." He paused. "The only thing I hoped was that nobody noticed."

"No one does. Except me."

"Why does it happen?"

"Because you think you're the only person in the whole world who's sure of anything." She was smiling, but her eyes and her voice were sharp. "And because you can't stand the idea that someone else is sure, too."

"What am I sure of?"

"That everything is going to be there the next time you need it. The kids are sure of better things. You're jealous, my love."

"I don't understand."

"I know. That's why I said it." She began to button her coat. "Bernie, you're a big baby. I love you very much, but when it comes to some things, you're still pishing in your diapers. I'm going back to the house."

"Just like that?" he asked, confused.

"I'm not going to try to woo you back. When you're ready you'll come."

"Are you angry at me?"

She stopped on her way to the door and thought a moment. "No."

"Then, why . . ."

She turned. "I'm impatient. It's like our first date. I'm impatient for you to come around. That's all."

"Come around to what, May? I don't understand a word . . ."

"I know. Go work in the garden. You're right. You need the afternoon to yourself."

She slipped out the door quickly. The shed turned cold from the draft, then warmed again. It was a terrible habit she had. She'd had it all their life together, that habit of starting to explain, then stopping just before he understood. It was like the way she told a joke: everything but the punch line. There he'd be, waiting for it, while she rolled on the floor because she knew how it ended.

Bernie got up and opened the door. May was running up the porch steps, her hands still in the pockets of her ridiculous coat. Beneath it she wore black slacks and an old red turtleneck sweater. Bernie knew precisely how her behind wobbled slightly as she landed on each step. "That's not an old woman," he said to himself.

He went behind the wheelbarrow and worked it out of the shed, careful not to let the pile of tools slide. Then he closed the

door behind him and took the barrow quickly around to the back of the house where he could not be seen.

The garden plot was a circle marked off with bricks. The corn and tomato stalks were starting to lose their color but they still stood high in two concentric circles in the center. After the close warmth of the shed, it seemed even colder outside. Bernie could feel his fingers start to stick together as he unplied the tools from the barrow and arranged them neatly on the ground. He would not need them right away.

The cucumber vines pulled out by hand. The big, floppy leaves had already started to yellow and fold, and naked patches of earth showed through. Bernie got down and traced the tendrils of the first vine back to the root. The ground was soft and damp on his knees, and the smell of the autumn earth mingled with the leaves and the heavy, leathery smell of his lumber jacket. He found the root and tugged. It came up easily. He shook the loose, dry dirt free, then worked the moist cake off the root tendrils with his hands. When it was clean, he lay the root with its profusion of vines and leaves in the wheelbarrow and went to search out the next.

He worked his way slowly to the center of the plot, pulling out the cucumber roots, draining them and laying them neatly in the barrow. Soon there was nothing left but the high tomato vines and corn stalks. He worked his way around the outer edge, pulling out the supports. The tomato vines rustled and snapped as they collapsed. He cleared the supports, then took the hand-spade from the pile of tools to uproot the vines. His hands warmed as he worked. Soon he could feel the difference when they touched the cold earth.

Bernie loved the garden this way. Down on his hands and knees, grasping the roots and washing his hands with earth, it was the one thing he could come to without confusion. At first he had nurtured flowerbeds, but the lilies and irises, begonias and even gardenias never satisfied him the way the heavy stalks and full leaves of his vegetables satisfied. Here, he could lose himself, crouched between the rows of corn and tomatoes.

He concentrated on the spade as it bit into the ground and worked the vines loose. All his universe was a hand, a spade and the earth he worked. Whatever it was that May was waiting for had nothing to do with him.

Some green tomatoes dropped from the vines as he cleared them. Bernie put them aside to bring into the house. He knew how to make them ripen by keeping them covered and hidden and then exposing them to the sun.



Only the corn stalks were left. It was late afternoon. The wheelbarrow was brimming with green and yellow leaves and the plot was naked except for the inner circle of stalks. He got in the center and dropped down once again, entirely hidden. The corn stalks gave to the handspade. They fell away around him one by one. Bernie revolved slowly, digging them up and letting them drop. His hands were caked with dirt and the smell of the damp roots was heavy and sweet.

The next to last stalk would not give. Bernie had to work to make it yield. He leaned in and put his shoulder behind the thrust of the spade. He worked it all around the base, then scooped up quickly from underneath and guided the full height of the plant down as it broke free from the earth. He had to stretch. He threw out two hands to keep from falling. Balancing there on all fours, Bernie glanced behind him as though he had been touched on the shoulder. There was nothing between him and the sky. It was a deeper, colder blue than he had ever seen.

His body had warmed from the struggle. His heart beat quickly. His breath made little puff balls in the air. The fallen stalks lay on the ground around him. The shadow of the one that still stood high in front of him stretched across the plot.

Bernie stared out at the empty, ice-clear sky. The sun was moving down; and as he crouched there, Bernie could feel the earth run away from it. His hands dug into the ground and he clung as though he were riding it, and while it turned, he heard his own heart and saw his breath and the fallen stalks and the lengthening shadow and yellow and folding leaves. Bernie shuddered. Everything he had come here for, the certainty of the garden and the touch of the earth, the comfort of his heart beat and breath, suddenly rose up to betray him as they measured time. He could see the moment. He tried to touch it, but it fell away and he reached out for the next and the next. He tried not to see, but this time he could not stop it by turning his eyes away. It was the air he breathed and the warmth of his body that floated up to his face from inside his heavy jacket. It was the dream knowledge May had held out to him and challenged him to come to by himself.

"Grampa!"

Bernie stiffened. Erica and Daniel ran around the side of the house. He got to his knees and turned to them. They ran across the lawn with their arms full of fallen leaves. The hoods of their jackets flapped behind them and stray leaves fell away from the bundles they carried. Erica's hair had fallen over her face again, Daniel's untied shoelace flapped against the side of

his shoe as they skimmed across the leaf-strewn lawn. He watched them, warm and vibrant, as they leapt toward him, as sure of their beginning as he was of his end. He opened his arms to receive them and to share the warmth he had found in his fallen garden.

They laughed and flew to him and showered him with their armloads of leaves. Bernie laughed and pulled them closer. All three bodies mingled warmth, sent up a momentary challenge to the overarching cold, and fell against the one lone stalk that snapped beneath the wriggling, joyous weight of all three certainties.

## After Awhile Comes Autumn

NINA SANDRICH

After awhile you learn to listen  
not to the sense of what is said,  
but to sound or portentous silence.

After awhile the candid stare  
is cancelled out by the covert shift  
of eyes concealed in their lids' disguise.

After awhile the hand within  
your hand regrets the contact,  
breaches contract, numbs away.

After awhile you love the lie  
for being truth, assert the wild  
improbable with lunatic sagacity.

After awhile, the road which seemed  
unending, circles, routes you back  
to shelter in a frozen cycle of mortality.



## Contributors

**M.** M. LIBERMAN first appeared in these pages with "Game" in our January, 1972, issue. He teaches at Grinnell College, Iowa. SISTER MAURA, S.S.N.D., has published three books of poetry and has a fourth in preparation at Newman Press. She teaches English at the College of Notre Dame of Maryland. CHARLES EDWARD EATON has been a regular contributor for many years. His latest book of poems, *On the Edge of the Knife*, won the Oscar Arnold Young Memorial Award. CAROL ADORJAN has published numerous stories for teen agers and several picture books for smaller children. Her story, "Requiem for a Virgin," was published here last January. The poems of WILLIAM VIRGIL DAVIS have been published in *Poetry*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Shenandoah*, and many other quarterlies. He teaches at the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle. W. S. DOXEY, associate professor of English at West Georgia College, makes his first appearance in this issue. His poems have appeared in *Descant*, *Prairie Schooner*, and elsewhere. DOUGLAS BOLLING is presently researching a comparative study of contemporary British and American novels. He lives in Rockford, Illinois. PHILIP K. JASON teaches English at Georgetown. This is his first appearance in *Four Quarters*. K. C. FREDERICK drove his family across the country last summer; that's when his unusual story was born. His stories have been seen in *Epoch*, *Shenandoah*, and *Ohio University Review*. ALAN BRODY'S stories have appeared in *Stories for the Sixties* (Bantam), and in the *Carleton Miscellany*. He is an associate professor of English at Skidmore College. NINA SANDRICH published several poems here last year and continues to be a regular contributor. She lives in North Hollywood, California. JOSEPH E. MEREDITH is a graduate student enrolled in the writing program at the University of Florida.

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